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DESIGN

How a Cluttered Townhouse Became a Soothing Oasis Thanks to Interior Design

Design pro Mike Rupp turned a Manhattan house packed with decades of collecting and chaotic decorating into a quietly distinctive home. His secret weapon? Pale blue.



NATURAL FLAVOR Materials such as pine and cork, as well as the palette of blues and greens, reflect the connection to the sky and backyard afforded by a wall of windows in the home's skylight room.

PHOTO: STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON/OTTO

By Dan Rubinstein

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WHEN INTERIOR DESIGNER Mike Rupp accepted the task of revamping an 1843 Greek Revival townhouse in New York's Gramercy neighborhood, he knew it wouldn't be a walk in the park. Decades of decoration by the client herself had yielded a cluttered, directionless space filled with traditional, oversize furniture in clashing colors and patterns. "Things were out of scale with the space, and colors didn't harmonize," said Mr. Rupp.

The collections the client and her husband had amassed added to the hodgepodge: art from travels to Africa and copious greyhound figurines inspired by their rescues of the oft-forsaken breed. The surfeit of stuff made visitors feel a bit like children in a preciously decorated house. "They're not formal people," Mr. Rupp said of the couple. "They're casual and warmhearted and wanted guests to feel the same way."

He introduced his client to the pared-back but handcrafted side of 20th-century modernism through artists and designers like Pierre Jeanneret, George Nakashima and Paul R. Evans. Sumptuous textures and a tight palette of blue and green pastels and neutrals further warmed the home, tying together 20th-century furniture, 19th-century architecture and many styles of art. "Don't be afraid to surround yourself with color," said Mr. Rupp, "but it doesn't have to be poppy, bold and aggressive."



PHOTO: STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON/OTTO

Tap the Quiet Power of Pale Blue

The second-floor parlor comprises a living and dining area, whose walls are clad in a nearly neutral pale blue paint, Whispering Spring from Benjamin Moore. In the dining space, Mr. Rupp upholstered the Wegner chairs that surround a walnut Nakashima table in a leather of a similarly muted blue. The black shades of the midcentury-styled chandelier visually connect to the shapes in a triptych by British artist Lisa Giles, and a geometrically patterned carved-wool rug with blue in the ground unifies the two rooms and "invites guests to get comfortable" on the carpet's high pile.



PHOTO: STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON/OTTO

Don't Let a Bathroom Get Too Impersonal

The client fell for the furniture of Pierre Jeanneret during the design process—so much so that Mr. Rupp had to "put his foot down" to prevent her from buying too much—and so he took care to put a piece in the bathroom. "I wanted her to start her day with a piece that makes her happy," he said. The biggest bathroom-design mistake? "Denying the space of [one's] personality," he said. "You don't want to make it like a hotel bathroom." Here, he added a Tuareg mat and the same paint as the parlor's.



PHOTO: STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON/OTTO

Weave Together the Handmade and Machine-Made

In the primary bedroom, Mr. Rupp covered the headboard in a Tuareg woven leather and reed mat from Morocco. "It brings color and movement into the space," he said. He painted the walls the same soft blue used elsewhere in the home. To balance out the room's crafty elements, including the African mask that is part of the owners' collection, he added a 1930s Swedish pewter lamp for "some aggressive metal." Its gleam contrasts with the soft alpaca blanket and lamb's wool pillow.



PHOTO: STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON/OTTO

Integrate Off-Period Elements With a Coat of Paint

The Arts & Crafts fireplace in the parlor came from a 1992 renovation. "It was screaming at us to be changed," Mr. Rupp said, but instead of replacing it, he painted the mantel a glossy black. "It gave it that modern edge." The background in the painting over the mantel and the armchair's leather again align with the home's prevailing soft blue, but reds connect the accent pillows on the 1950s armchairs to bits of tile in the fireplace surround. Meanwhile, the curvilinear sofa clad in a fluffy lamb's wool "beckons to be curled up on."



PHOTO: STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON/OTTO

For Tranquility, Connect Design to Nature

On the top floor of the home, Mr. Rupp continued to lean toward the clean lines of midcentury modernism executed in warm materials. Three curvaceous 1930s Axel Einar-Hjorth chairs in folksy pine encircle a cork-topped Paul Frankl Cloud coffee table from the 1950s. Blue leather softens the boxiness of the sofa, while on the walls, Benjamin Moore's Hollingsworth Green, a pale sage, connects to the view of a backyard. Nature also gets a wink acknowledgment from a giant stainless-steel flower by late American sculptor Gloria Kischl. A 1940s Swedish rug hews to the home's blue-green palette but adds touches of pink.